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ABSTRACT

Problems relating to program discontinuance and the role of institutional research are discussed, drawing on a study supported by the Exxon Foundation of 10 predominantly large public universities that have either reviewed and closed programs or have gone through recent financial difficulties. Careful analysis is necessary to know that savings are possible in the long or short run as a result of program discontinuance. Program discontinuance requires assessment of the impact of making marginal shifts in the allocation of resources. Program closure is extremely time-consuming, comparable data for the units under review are needed, and there is a lack of accepted standards for measuring research productivity. There is also a lack of clear definition of institutional mission. Four basic questions that must be addressed concerning program review are: who has the authority to review? What programs will be reviewed? What criteria will be used? And, what procedures will be most appropriate to the situation? The role of state agencies, what can be done to avoid discontinuance, and actions that should be taken if closure is desirable and inevitable are discussed. (SW)

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The Role of Institutional Research in Program Discontinuance

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INTRODUCTION

Formalization

Most of our information systems were constructed during a period of growth with an aim of providing information for administrators about where to place expanding resources. The kind of information needed concerned potential for growth more than realized accomplishments. Priority decisions were additive in nature, with administrators assuming that what could not be done this year could certainly be done next year.

Today we are in a different period where priority decisions are made more in terms of substitution than addition. Our information needs involve both accessment of potential and accessment of realized accomplishment (or failure), and the whole process has become more formalized. Most institutions have had the capacity to access potential and realized accomplishments through some system of informal or ad hoc review, but one pattern that has emerged today is the formalization of the process of review and evaluation.

Politicalization

At the same time the process is becoming more formalized, it is becoming more political. Various interest groups are vying for scarce resources, seeking to increase their share of the funding, or to prevent the decrease or elimination of their share altogether. One consequence of this politicalization is that every program became highly competitive and in some cases even uncooperative, blocking new ideas and holding back new developments. The formalization and politicalization of review and evaluation processes are greatly intensified when program discontinuance is contemplated, and they greatly increase the burden placed on institutional researchers.

Let us look at some of the problems and needs for information in this new setting, especially as they relate to program discontinuance. I will be drawing on a study supported by the Exxon Foundation of 10 institutions. Most of these institutions are large, public universities that have either reviewed and closed programs and/or have gone through recent financial difficulties, but their experience can be valuable in a wide range of circumstances.

SOME NEEDS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

The Need for Adequate Financial Analysis

One of the most important things to keep in mind about program closure is that it will not save money in most cases. At best, closure may reduce future budget commitments, but when tenured faculty are released, it will not save money. Most of the institutions studied did not release tenured faculty and did not save real dollars. They tended to move faculty or take positions by attrition, but not release tenured faculty. Albany and Pennsylvania are both exceptions to this generalization. Albany lost 88 faculty positions and released 30 tenured faculty when they cut 26 programs. Pennsylvania is in the process of releasing 21 faculty in their School of Allied Medical Professions, but only 4 of those were tenured.

In order to know what savings are possible in the long or short run as a result of program discontinuance, careful analysis is necessary. The University of Pennsylvania did a careful cost analysis before closing its Allied Health Program. They calculated not only savings resulting from released faculty but costs resulting from factors such as the loss of student fee revenue. They found, for example, that savings would be realized only if the student positions were picked up by other schools or colleges on campus without requiring additional faculty. This type of cost analysis can be

extremely important in making decisions about program discontinuance and should be recognized as a primary need among institutional researchers.

The Analysis of Marginal Costs

A second need brought on by program discontinuance is the need to assess the impact of making marginal shifts in the allocation of resources. If we close program X and give the resources to program Y, what will the impact be? Will we really save dollars by closing program X after we calculate the obligation to tenured faculty and loss of student fee revenue, not to mention the time and energy of faculty and administrators and possible legal costs? If there are real dollars to be saved, what will be gained by putting them in program Y? We need to understand how marginal increases and decreases will affect the quality of programs. We must also recognize that judgments about those marginal shifts will often be subjective and imprecise, yet inspite of the subjectivity and imprecision of such decisions, institutional researchers can provide vital information and insight into the most effective way of measuring the impact of marginal shifts of resources.

The Need for Timeliness

A third problem associated with program closure is that it is extremely time-consuming. The time needed to review, prioritize and close programs is usually so great that it cannot be done in the midst of severe financial crisis. When severe budget cuts are required the tendency will be to cut across the board rather than to cut programs. Again, Albany is the exception. It was able to cut programs in the face of severe financial crisis, but only because they had an established process of review that had produced detailed information about

each program. The administration had also established a process of priority setting that could be utilized when the budget cuts required immediate response.

An example of the problem created by untimely review is the State of Washington's assessment of graduate programs by the Council for Postsecondary Education. While this group looked only at quantitative data, it took nearly three years to issue its first report. Part of the problem was trying to review 300 graduate programs at once. By the time they finished, many personnel changes had taken place on the campuses under study, and programs had also changed, making their recommendations for program closure highly controversial. Again, institutional researchers can provide valuable help in pointing out the most effective review procedures and limiting the task of the administrator to a manageable one, maximizing its effectiveness.

The Need for Comparable Data

A fourth problem in program discontinuance is comparable data for the units under review. One characteristic of the programs considered for discontinuance is their isolation. They are often isolated from the main mission of the institution, and often they are isolated in terms of the kinds of records they keep. In order to justify their existence, for example, they may generate reams of data on "client contacts," but upon further examination one finds that a "client contact" may vary from a five-minute check-in, to an all-day intensive treatment program.

On the other hand, many institutional data bases do not have sufficient flexibility to deal with something like "client contacts" in a service unit. Student credit hours are understood, but not client contacts. The need, then,

is for a flexible system that allows for comparisons between apples and oranges. Unfortunately in dealing with program discontinuance, we are rarely asked to grade simply apples or simply oranges, but fruit of a great variety, some of which is overripe! The task of the institutional research is to provide a flexible information system that will allow for a comparison of diverse types of program.

The Need for Acceptable Measures of Research Productivity

Another problem in dealing with discontinuance is the lack of accepted standards for measuring research productivity. Yet it is often on the basis of such a criterion that a program is judged inadequate, especially at a research university. For example, the graduate political science program at Louisiana State University was closed, in part, because of low research productivity. The department chairman, however, pointed out that the faculty were all young and just beginning to establish publication records. Since the closure of the program some eight books and numerous articles have been published. This example points out the difficulty of accounting for such items as "works in progress" in measuring research productivity. Institutional researchers can help by encouraging the adoption of acceptable measures of research productivity that fit the individual campus situation.

The Need for an Understanding of Institutional Mission

Finally, one last problem in program discontinuance is the lack of clear definition of institutional mission. We have already mentioned that programs being discontinued are often outside the accepted notion of institutional mission. For example, in a research university programs that get discontinued are often the service programs or graduate training programs that do not do sufficient

research. Berkeley offers a good example of a program being discontinued, in part, because it was outside the accepted mission of the institution. The School of Criminology was trying to perform two tasks: scholarly research in criminology and graduate training in the field. The Berkeley faculty review committee found that the way the School was performing its tasks was not appropriate to a professional school at Berkeley. Another example can be found at Pennsylvania where the Board found that the School of Allied Medical Professions, which offered only undergraduate courses, was inappropriate to the definition of Pennsylvania as a major research university. Institutional researchers have tended to minimize the importance of role and mission statements of universities, but they may become increasingly important as questions of discontinuance arise. Institutional researchers can help their institutions set priorities that are compatible with its historic mission, thus sharpening the understanding of that mission.

THE REVIEW DOCUMENT

Let us now turn our attention to the review document that is, perhaps, the single most important document in program discontinuance. I am assuming that prior to every decision to discontinue a program there will be some form of review. The resulting document will be important to the administrator because it will expand the pool of expert judgment recommending discontinuance. By having a review done by trusted peers in the field who are well respected on campus, the administrator can head off changes of capricious or arbitrary action. The task of program discontinuance is largely a job of convincing

others that the institution would be better off without program X. The administrator must convince both faculty and board members that his judgment on the matter is correct. He or she will be greatly aided in this task by the review document.

There are four basic questions that must be addressed concerning program review: Who has the authority to review? What programs will be reviewed? What criteria will be used? And, what procedures will be most appropriate to the situation?

The Question of Authority

Virtually everyone claims authority for program review: the faculty, the campus administrator, the graduate dean, the external coordinating board, even the state legislature may claim such authority. Several of the institutions studied centered the concern for discontinuance on graduate programs, and the authority for review rested with the graduate school. But in some cases, as at Berkeley with Criminology, the graduate school review committee was asked by a special committee of the faculty senate to look at undergraduate programs as well. In other situations, as at Michigan, the school and college deans have authority to review programs along with the Academic Vice President. In several cases the authority to review shifts from one group to the next over time. Most campuses do have some informal understandings about who reviews what, but as questions of discontinuance arise, those informal agreements may be challenged and a more formalized procedure may have to be adopted. Once again, we see the tightening of informal procedures into more formalized systems. Institutional researchers may have an important role in guiding that change.

The same process of formalization can be seen at the state level. The governing boards have authority to review programs, but they often delegate

that responsibility to individual campuses, retaining the right to do ad hoc, lateral reviews. For example, the Wisconsin Board of Regents allowed Madison and Milwaukee, its two doctoral granting institutions, to review their own graduate programs, but the system-wide administration reviewed masters and specialist degree programs on the other campuses. The State Coordinating Boards (as opposed to governing boards) vary widely in their power to review existing programs, but many have been given legislative mandates to do reviews and to make recommendations about discontinuance. The trend is clearly in the direction of state agencies assuming more authority for review and discontinuance and formalizing the procedures concerning those activities. As questions of discontinuance become more frequent, it will become important to institutional researchers to know exactly where the lines of authority begin and end.

What Programs Should be Reviewed?

The question of what programs should be reviewed may seem like a simple one, but it is loaded with political overtones. We have already mentioned Washington's Council on Postsecondary Education that tried to review nearly 300 doctoral degree programs. Many faculty criticized the process as being superficial and unproductive. A more typical pattern is to use some set of quantitative indicators to select programs for review. Using factors such as degree productivity or trends in student credit hour productivity allows one to select particular programs for more thorough review, rather than trying to review every program at once. Another typical pattern is to review programs in logical clusters. The system-wide administration in Florida, for example, reviewed all Nursing programs at once. Each professional area or discipline will be reviewed, in turn, on campuses throughout the system.

Louisiana has followed that same pattern, which was begun, I believe, in New York State following the recommendations of the Fleming Commission. Finally, places like Berkeley and Michigan review programs at the discretion of the dean or vice president, often tying reviews to the term appointments of deans or department chairmen. Again, institutional researchers can provide the necessary data that will help administrators make judgments about what programs to review and can also make recommendations about the most appropriate method of selection for their campus.

The Question of Criteria

There are two basic types of criteria that can be used to evaluate programs: one is quantitative and the other qualitative. Usually review groups will use some combinations of these criteria, but the farther away the review is done from the operational unit, the greater will be the tendency to rely on quantitative data. This tendency seems obvious, in some sense. The farther away one gets from experts in the field, the less likely is one able to make qualitative judgments about the field and the greater reliance one places on quanitfiable data. One way around this problem for state agencies is to use outside experts to evaluate programs. The only problem with this system is that the state agencies themselves have no basis to judge the expert's opinions. Faculty at Louisiana State, for example, criticized the closure of the graduate political science program because the system-wide administration too readily accepted the evaluation of the outside experts and did not listen to the responses made by the department itself.

The Education Commission of the State has recommended ten criteria that combine quanitative and qualitative concerns. These criteria are the

kind frequently used by state agencies and include such items as number of graduates, enrollment, size and cost of classes, cost per program, faculty workload, and program quality.[1] In contrast to this set of criteria Russo and Brown focus on five criteria that are more typically used by internal review committees. They are: quality of instruction, quality of faculty, centrality of program, program uniqueness and potential.[2] The contrast between these 2 sets of criteria is stricking and presents a unique challenge to institutional researchers. My own bias is in favor doing reviews as close to the operating units as possible and using qualitative criteria. But my plea is to use procedures and criteria that are most appropriate to the situation.

The Question of Process

What is the most appropriate methodology for program review? Once again, no single pattern emerges as universal. Under the best conditions, the process will be selected according to the circumstances. Under the worst conditions, the decision will be one of political convenience. The most frequently used pattern involved some form of peer evaluation of programs. With the exception of the State of Washington, no programs have been discontinued without some form of peer reviews. In some cases, the evaluators are from outside the institution in other cases they are internal. Rarely do they include more than a liaison person from within the program under review. The important thing seems to be the rendering of some professional judgment on the quality and/or effectiveness of the program.

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[1] National Board of Graduate Education, Doctoral Manpower Forecasts and Policy, No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: N.B.G.E., 1973) p. 20.

[2] J. Robert Russo and David G. Brown, "A Model for Internal Program Review," College and University, Vol. LII, No. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 288-298.

Another important procedural element in program discontinuance is a flexibility and fairness. Again, this may be obvious, but too often institutional researchers can get wedded to a procedure that does not allow for input from all constituencies and that seems inflexible and unfair. A procedure that is viewed as flexible and fair can withstand identified deficiencies in selection procedure or criteria, but without that sense of fairness no amount of tinkering will overcome faculty objections.

THE ROLE OF STATE AGENCIES

Before turning to my final conclusions, let me say a word about the role of state agencies. I have already mentioned the tendency toward more formal systems of coordination and program review. Another recognizable trend is that of using statewide reviews as a mechanism for providing local institutions with state, regional or national perspectives. For example, the review of Nursing in Florida pointed out national trends in nursing that were either not recognized or not implemented at the local level. Large amounts of money were being spent on the preparation of nurses to deliver secondary care to patients in Florida, but the trend nationally is toward increasing preparation at primary and tertiary levels. With this information, the state agencies and the institutions are beginning to plan for shifts in their training programs.

State agencies can bring a broader perspective to local institutions, but they do not necessarily close programs more frequently than local institutions. One of the surprising findings of this study is the fact that institutions can and do close programs on their own without help from outside agencies. Berkeley, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Riverside closed programs only on the basis of

internal reviews. In states where there are both internal and external reviews, programs were closed as frequently on the basis of internal reviews as on the basis of external reviews, with one exception. Louisiana State would not have closed any programs on its own, but the Louisiana Board did take action against the graduate program in political science. The presence or absence of state-wide reviews does not, however, make a decisive difference in determining the presence or absence of program closure. State-wide agencies may add a needed perspective to program review, but they are not the only group closing programs.

CONCLUSIONS

What kind of programs get closed? A sample of eleven institutions is not one from which reliable conclusions can be drawn, but some trends are present. In the major research universities the programs that are most likely to get closed are those outside the commonly accepted definition of the university. They are often professional training and/or service programs that are not contributing to the main research function of the university. In a more general way, programs are discontinued because they do not fit the institutional mission, however defined. The role of the institutional researchers, then, is to understand that mission and help clarify it in some meaningful way. That may not be easy for those who are used to dealing only with quantifiable variables, but the benefit of institutional research in the future may be measured in terms of its contribution to the understanding of institutional mission.

Being on the outs may mean not meeting certain qualitative standards of the university. Very often the quality of a given program will be related to how the institution conceives of its mission. At a research university, for example, the program that offers only undergraduate courses and no research will

be considered low in quality. The Pennsylvania discontinuance is a case in point.

Being on the outs may also mean that a program does not meet certain quantitative standards of the institution. For example, if a program loses outside grant support and has declining student numbers, then it may be vulnerable to discontinuance. The School of Engineering Science at Florida State, for example, never reached a critical mass in terms of faculty and student numbers. When the bottom dropped out of the engineering job market temporarily, the program was cut.

Another important factor in determining whether a program will be discontinued is "opportunity." In several of the cases studied there was opportunity to move tenured faculty. For example, at the University of Washington, prior to the C.E.P. closings, the administration closed several programs in home economics. The number of tenured faculty was low, several left voluntarily, and others could be relocated elsewhere. There were also few tenured faculty in the Criminology Program at Berkeley, giving administrators the necessary opportunity to respond to a problem of declining quality.

Finally some programs are closed because of physical and intellectual isolation. Programs that have few supports who can say that their activity is vital to the life of other departments, will be vulnerable to closure. At Michigan, for example, the population planning program was doing good outside service and training but few within the university saw it as essential to other departments. By contrast, when a speech and hearing program was recommended by the dean for discontinuance, a number of units said that its service was essential to their operation and the program was transferred rather than closed.

In conclusion, we have focused a lot on how to close programs, let us reverse the process and ask what can be done to avoid discontinuance: (1) set program priorities on a clear understanding of institutional mission, (2) don't let quality deteriorate, (3) keep faculty numbers in line with enrollments, (4) develop curricular and faculty relations with other departments. Some of the goals can be achieved by (5) expanding program functions within program guidelines to avoid overspecialization, (6) doing long range planning, (7) maintaining strong leadership, (8) avoiding financial difficulties of your own making, and (9) building in sufficient flexibility to weather unexpected storms.

And what if closure is desirable and inevitable? Then the following actions should be taken: (1) establish lines of authority for program closure, (2) establish agreed upon review procedures, (3) establish procedures for making priority decisions, (4) establish procedures for giving notice to or relocating faculty and staff, (5) provide for input from faculty and students, and (6) if programs are cut to save money, cut programs where real dollar savings will result, not ones that produce more revenues than expenditures.